How a Patch of the Kenyan Wild Ended up in Philippines

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Sometime between May 1976 and February 1977, 102 wild animals were herded into large wooden crates at an undisclosed location in Kenya. The crates were then bundled onto the overnight cargo train to Mombasa, setting in motion a series of events that should never have happened.

10 months prior, the then President of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos and his infamously acquisitive wife Imelda landed in Nairobi. President Marcos was in Kenya to open the 4th United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The conference had been held in Manila, Philippines the year before. At some point during his stay in Kenya, Ferdinand Marcos made his way to a downtown hotel in Nairobi. He was carrying a heavy briefcase, in it the total sum of $25,000 in bound stacks of $100 bills. This amount was the down payment of a larger fee of $99, 250 that would eventually be paid out to an Englishman called Tony Parkinson to complete an odd task; to capture wildlife for a private safari park the Marcos family had in mind.
Parkinson did his job with cold efficiency. In under a year, he amassed an impressive exotic collection of 18 impalas, 14 giraffes, 14 zebras, 12 waterbucks,

12 bushbucks, 11 elands, 11 gazelles, and 10 topis. He hunted them down and secluded them until he had built the entire collection. Then he bundled them onto the overnight train to the Mombasa port.
At Kilindini, the wooden crates were transferred onto the open deck of MV Don Salvador III, a cargo ship on its maiden voyage. The ship, owned by one of Marcos' cronies, set out for the Philippines with the animals. The wooden crates bearing the incredibly tall giraffes were designed to allow their long necks to protrude through the slacks, while other animals were locked up entirely. MV Salvador took three weeks to cut across the Indian Ocean, through the Strait of Malacca and over the South China Sea to a small island called Calauit. It was this tiny island that the now 104 animals in captivity would learn to call home, 9, 700 kilometres away from their natural range. There had been two live births during the voyage.
Calauit, small, neglected and constantly lashed by cyclones has never had a harbour deep enough to hold anything near the MV Salvador's size. So the government sent small military landing crafts to bring the animals to shore. It was D-Day, only with animals, Parkinson would later say.

Image by Tony Parkinson

Ferdinand Marcos was at hand to receive his African guests, seemingly oblivious of their predicament. He ceremoniously released one antelope, which was subsequently renamed Ferdinand, marking the beginning of an unnecessarily hard life for the animals. Calauit was selected for its isolation and, in the wisdom of the despot, that it resembled the African wild. Its isolation would reduce poaching and disease, allowing the animals to thrive.
Their new home had been prepared for them since the year before. First, President Marcos had signed the Presidential Proclamation 1578 on August 31, 1976, declaring Calauit a national reserve. The 254 families living there at the time were subsequently evicted to a new home 40km away. (+254 is, incidentally, the international code for Kenya).

History is unclear over why Ferdinand Marcos went to such trouble to own African animals. His justification, supported by his still-living wife and his now-politician son, is that he loved animals. This narrative claims that during the conference in Kenya in 1976, Nairobi begged the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for assistance in conserving its diverse wildlife species. President Marcos, in his goodwill, the story goes, established what is today known as the Calauit Safari Park as his modest contribution.

Only there is no record of this request. The IUCN actually has a long-standing policy against relocating animals to places that are beyond their natural range. There is a more likely story, a story of vanity and collusion.

The most common unofficial story suggests he established the park for his son Ferdinand Jr. to use as hunting grounds. In an interview in late 2013 with William Mellor of Bloomberg, Ferdinand Jr. disagreed, saying instead Sure I went hunting, but it was for wild boars that were eating the antelope young. It was never the exotics." It could have been the love of a doting father to a son, or simply the avarice of a ruthless despot.

Parkinson, the man who caught the animals, remembers a different sequence of events. He was already a wildlife catcher when Ferdinand Marcos and his cronies approached him to do the job. This was months before the conference in Kenya, meaning Marcos trip to the Eastern African country had other motivations. Where Imelda Marcos, known as the Steel Butterfly, had an obsessive taste for shoes and bullet proof bras, Ferdinand Marcos was a man who liked money, and exotic things. Parkinson thinks they intended to open a safari park that would be a real-life mini-Serengeti. Ferdinand Marcos was already a brutal, US-supported, communist-hating dictator at the time, and he ran the country like his own backyard. He wanted lions and other predators in the park too, but Parkinson dissuaded him.

His trip to Kenya must have included paying off even more people because the entire operation had the approval of the Ministry of Tourism. No research was ever done on where they were being relocated to, and what the climate and other conditions were. Papers were signed, and fates sealed.

The evicted families began moving back in the 1990s and today, about 1000 people battle for resources with the animals. One giraffe was killed in such an incident four years ago. Other than conflict with humans, the animals have suffered as cyclones and other forms of harsh weather have battered the island. Super Typhoon Haiyan, for example, traumatised the animals and injured nine giraffes and three zebras. It also destroyed their food, putting the herbivores at risk of starvation. There is also the problem of inbreeding because the animals have been reproducing with the same gene pool for four generations. If

unchecked, the lack of diversity will kill off the animals, one species after the other.

Calauit Safari Parks 9, 291 acres now host 480 descendants of the Kenyan animals, and about 1,390 local animals. The topi, Thomson's Gazelle, and the impala species all died out in less than two decades due to poaching and infighting. Poaching remains one of the greatest threats even today.

This odd Safari Park was opened to the public in 2009 and is now widely marketed as a mini-Serengeti. As a place where Noah's Ark left a token. No one associates it with a dictator's expensive whims. Instead, the brutality of its foundation is covered up with gleaming fabricated stories of heroism and compassion for "*African animals in need of a home*."